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SUBJECT: POLOFF GAINS ACCESS TO TAJIK PRISONS, VISITS
GUANTANAMO RETURNNEES

REF: A. A) STATE 18705

1B. B) DUSHANBE 390

Classified By: AMBASSADOR TRACEY A. JACOBSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)
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11. (C) Summary: On April 24, PolOff visited Sobit Vakhidov and Rahmaddin Sharopov, both returnees from Guantanamo now held in Tajik prison, pursuant to a 2006 agreement between the United States and Tajikistan. There were numerous bureaucratic complications in gaining access to them, and we were only able to get a general impression of their treatment in Tajik prison colonies. However, we were also able to get some information about the country's penal system, to which few internationals have had access in recent years. End summary.

Getting Past the Bureaucracy

12. (SBU) Despite the presence of an agreement specifically giving U.S. officials access to Guantanamo returnees, the Tajik bureaucracy presented a formidable challenge. Tajik authorities have generally refused internationals access to prison facilities; they continue to refuse to allow the International Committee for the Red Cross to carry out prison inspections. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs took more than six weeks to coordinate the arrangements with the Ministry of Justice, which runs the prison system. We originally sent our request by diplomatic note on March 6. We had several meetings with prison officials who did not appear to have the instructions that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials told us they had sent. We repeatedly contacted our Ministry of Foreign Affairs counterparts to inform them of what their Ministry of Justice colleagues told us. Just as we started to think that the authorities intended to deny us access, we got a green light for our visit.

High Security) But Not Maximum Security

14. (SBU) We were escorted by Col. Hudamon Muborakqadamov, who gave us details of the circumstances under which Vakhidov and Sharopov are being held. (We are using the prisoners' names as spelled on their prison uniform. Several variations exist due to inconsistent transliterations. The names used in post's Ref B interim response were SHARIPOV and VOHIDOV.) Both prisoners had been convicted by Tajik courts for terrorism related offenses (articles 335 and 401 of the Tajik Criminal Code) supporting mercenaries and unlawful border crossing) shortly after returning from Guantanamo, and both had been sentenced to 17 years of imprisonment. Both are being held in high security penal colonies) Vakhidov in Dushanbe, and Sharopov in Vahdat. We were given access only

to the administrative buildings of the penal colonies; we were not permitted to view the rest of the prison grounds, including the areas where the prisoners were being held.

¶15. (SBU) Prison officials told us that each of the penal colonies houses more than 1000 inmates, all convicted of serious crimes. Prisoners are housed in barracks which contain approximately 50 beds. The areas around the beds are considered the prisoners' "individual spaces" where they are allowed to keep personal articles. Prisoners are required to adhere to schedules prepared by the prison authorities; meals are served at 6am, 1pm, and 6pm, and there are 6 roll calls during the day (when prisoners must stand beside their beds).

Lights-out is from 10pm to 6am. (Note: While the colonies where the GITMO returnees are kept have stringent security regimes, they are not the most restrictive in the prison system; maximum security prisons are reserved for Qsystem; maximum security prisons are reserved for particularly violent criminals, such as those with multiple murder convictions. Prisoners in these maximum security prisons are kept in cells, not barracks, and cannot freely walk about the prison grounds. End note.)

¶16. (SBU) Each of the colonies has a library and a prayer room.

Prisoners can use the library during their free time, and they are permitted to worship in accordance with their faith.

(There are some Orthodox prisoners, but most are Muslim.) Prisoners may speak to imams, and they are permitted to keep Korans in their "individual spaces." The prison colonies have work programs, and prisoners can earn credits that they can use to purchase items at prison-run stores. There are no general restrictions on prisoner to prisoner communication, and prisoners are permitted visitors pending approval by the authorities.

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At Last We Meet

¶17. (C) We met Vakhidov and Sharopov in the offices of the prison colonies' directors, and Col. Muborakqadamov and the prison colony director sat in during each meeting. Guards brought each prisoner into the office, showed him to a chair in the middle of the room, and then left and closed the door behind them. The prisoners wore simple black pants and shirts, and they were not handcuffed or restrained in any way. There were no particular security precautions taken during the interviews, although guards remained posted outside the office. Neither prisoner had any visible indication that he had been mistreated. PolOff spoke in English, and PolAssistant translated into Tajiki.

¶18. (C) Vakhidov's demeanor was sullen. He spent most of the interview staring at the floor; he never looked directly at the prison officials or at EmbOffs. He corroborated the general conditions that Muborakqadamov had described for us, but said that he was "not allowed to go to the mosque." He said that his father had visited twice, and that he was allowed to speak to his father without the presence of prison officials. He was allowed to accept packages from his father containing food. He said that he had had some stomach problems, and that he received medicine from his father. He had also visited the prison doctor.

¶19. (C) Sharopov was more animated; he looked at EmbOffs when speaking to them. His beard had been shaved, as prison rules prohibit facial hair. He said that he had participated in a work detail) he and a group of other prisoners were taken to a nearby factory to perform some repair work. He has had one visitor) a brother in law) but has otherwise had no contact with family members. Sharopov said that his lawyer had asked that his 5 years in Guantanamo count against his sentence in Tajikistan. He said the court denied the motion, as there was no official confirmation from the U.S. Government about his detention. He asked that EmbOffs pass on this information to the relevant officials.

As An Added Bonus, Some Information on the Penal System

¶10. (C) While traveling to and from the prisons, we took the opportunity to engage Muborakqadamov in a discussion of Tajik prisons. Muborakqadamov described a system that has not changed markedly from the Soviet period; the main goal of prison guards is to "rehabilitate and correct" aberrant behavior. He said that the system has lost specialists who had been trained at academies in Russia and Kazakhstan, and that the overall quality of prison officials was very low. Prison guards have a meager salary, have dangerous jobs, and are not trained well enough to run the system like it had been run under the Soviets. Muborakqadamov himself has been in the prison service for 35 years, and he regrets the loss of professional exchanges that prison officials enjoyed before Tajikistan's independence. He was very curious about prison systems in the United States, and he suggested an exchange program.

¶11. (C) Comment: Given the fact that we had limited access to the prison facilities, and that we conducted interviews in the presence of prison officials, we cannot draw any definitive conclusions about the prisoners' detentions. Neither prisoner exhibited signs of mistreatment, and their accounts of prison conditions generally corroborated the information given to us by Col. Muborakqadamov. The prisoners had obviously gotten used to a strict regime. Qprisoners had obviously gotten used to a strict regime imposed by prison officials. (When they sat down in our meetings, they both voluntarily put their hands behind their chairs, although they were not restrained.) EmbOffs got the impression that they were both holding back at least some information because of the presence of prison officials. Vakhidov was not particularly communicative, and he seemed resigned to the fact that he would be spending a long time in jail. Sharopov was thinking of how to make his prison stay shorter, and what he could do when he got out. PolOff detected in his mannerisms a sense of bitterness and hostility, although he alluded to the fact that conditions in Guantanamo were better than those in Tajikistan.

¶12. (C) Comment continued: As has been our experience in other settings, Muborakqadamov's openness and cooperation was a stark contrast to higher level officials' obstructions. The director of the penal system, General Izatullo Sharipov, is regarded in the international community as being uncooperative and corrupt. We suspect that Muborakqadamov has accurately characterized the overall professional

capacity of prison officials as deteriorating. End comment.
JACOBSON